

In the Claims

Claims 1 to 7 (cancelled).

8.(amended) A system for processing drilling fluid during top-hole drilling in underwater drilling operations comprising

a sealing device for mounting ~~on a template of~~ over a drilling hole in sealed relation to the surroundings seawater to prevent leakage of drilling fluid from the drilling hole;

a floating drilling vessel having at least one of a treatment plant for treating drilling fluid and a storage installation to receive drilling fluid;

at least one pump module spaced from and connected to said sealing device to effect a differential pressure therein for pumping drilling fluid from said sealing device upwardly to said at least one of a said treatment plant and a said storage installation on said vessel; and

a line extending from said pump module upwardly to said at least one of a treatment plant and a storage installation on said vessel to convey the drilling fluid from said pump module to said at least one of a treatment plant and a storage installation on said vessel.

9.(amended) A system as set forth in claim 8 wherein said sealing device and said pump module are interconnected to form a suction and centralization module.

10.(previously added) A system as set forth in claim 8 further comprising a submerged electric motor operatively connected to said pump to drive said pump.

4 ~~11~~ (previously added) A system as set forth in claim ~~8~~ wherein said pump generates an outlet pressure dependent on the ocean depth and weight of the drilling fluid sufficient to transport the drilling fluid to said drilling vessel.

5 ~~12~~ (amended) A method of processing drilling fluid from a drilling hole in an ocean bed during top-hole drilling before a BOP blowout preventer is installed and a riser connected between the BOP blowout preventer and a drilling vessel, said method comprising the steps of

mounting a sealing device over the drilling hole in sealed relation to the surroundings seawater ~~on a template of the drilling hole~~;

mounting at least one pump module in spaced relation to and connected to said sealing device to effect a differential pressure therein;

B1 providing an outlet pressure for the drilling fluid based on said differential pressure and the species specific weight of mud to be transported and the ocean depth; and

pumping drilling fluid from the sealing device into a line extending upwardly to at least one of a treatment plant and a storage installation on a said floating drilling vessel.

6 ~~13~~ (previously added) A method as set forth in claim ~~12~~ ⁵ which further comprises the step of returning the drilling fluid from the drilling vessel into the drilling hole.

7 ~~14~~ (amended) A method as set forth in claim ~~12~~ ⁵ which further comprises the step of directing the drilling fluid from the drilling vessel into the ocean bed in spaced relation to the drilling hole ~~to form~~ for injection into a further drilling hole.